

A Watchdog for the CIA

Disturbed by reports of a clash between Ambassador Lodge and the Central Intelligence Agency in Viet Nam, Senators Gruening and Morse have called for a congressional watchdog committee to keep an eye on the hush-hush agency and its "creeping police state methods."

Cloak-and-dagger work generally is regarded as necessary in the cold war world, yet it has been difficult to keep down doubts about an agency which may seem to be responsible only to itself. Since its funds are voted blindly, concealed in other budget items, Congress does not have even the control that goes with the power of the purse.

Absence of oversight is the more disturbing since the CIA not only gathers information in secret, but also may carry on overt activities in secret. Even if it is unlikely to plunge into hostilities against the wishes of the President, Congress and people, Mr. Lodge's experience shows what may happen. Chosen for a difficult mission by the President himself, he quickly came to the suspicion that the CIA was countering his efforts behind his back. This was denied, of course, but secrecy deprived the denial of some of its credibility.

Patriotic motives are no guarantees against mistakes where broad authority without public accountability may induce secret agents to act on their own assumptions. But the risk of fighting fire with fire might be reduced by a committee similar to the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

Confident surveillance might be difficult where secrecy—and even deception—is so pervasive. And the committee would have to be almost as secretive as the CIA itself. This could be offset, however, by the appointment of men of the highest character. It also would help if the chairman were alternately a Senator or a Representative, elected every two years by the committee members on the basis of competence rather than seniority.

The arrangement would be less than perfect. Yet in coping with spies, conspirators and fighters without uniform or flag, it would add to the assurance that counter-measures were being kept within the limits of the defensive and the prudent.